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Viewing cable 08MOSCOW1991, RUSSIA RETURNS TO THE HOLY LAND

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- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
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| Reference ID | Created | Released | Classification | Origin |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 08MOSCOW1991 | 2008-07-11 12:27 | 2011-08-30 01:44 | CONFIDENTIAL | Embassy Moscow |

Appears in these articles:

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PP RUEHROV
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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8990
INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MOSCOW 001991

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/11/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [SOCI](#) [MARR](#) [IS](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: RUSSIA RETURNS TO THE HOLY LAND

REF: A. MOSCOW 517
[1](#)B. MOSCOW 1255

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Robert Patterson for reasons
1.4 (b/d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The return to Russia of historic properties in Jerusalem and the West Bank, and the end of the visa regime for travel to Israel, are the latest indicators of deepening Russia-Israel relations that depend significantly

upon personal contacts as well as official channels. The properties, which will be used to establish a Russian consulate in Jerusalem and cultural and religious centers, will enhance Russia's soft power by increasing the Russian presence at a time when immigration to Israel has declined. Russia continues to benefit economically from these emigres, many of whom have established businesses in Israel that trade with Russia or have returned to their homeland to work in Russia's booming economy. The end of the visa regime is expected to significantly increase personal and economic contacts between these countries that currently enjoy deep cultural ties and the strongest political relationship in their often stormy history. Close ties to Israel do not appear, however, to have had much impact on Moscow's "pragmatic" positions on issues of concern to Tel Aviv, such as arms sales to Syria. End summary.

Israel and Palestinians Return Russian Property

¶2. (U) Russia will receive several properties in Jerusalem and the West Bank from the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Israeli government, which are returning land that Russia originally acquired in the nineteenth century for the construction of Orthodox churches and facilities for Russian pilgrims to the Holy Land. During a June ceremony, the PA formally gave Russia ownership of three plots of land in the West Bank that will be the site of new Russian cultural and religious centers. Russian and Israeli officials announced in May that they were close to finalizing the terms for Russia to take ownership of a large compound in Jerusalem that includes St. Sergiev Church and an adjacent building originally used as a religious mission. As one of his last acts as President, Putin ordered that the GOR provide \$4 million to restore the church.

Return to the Holy Land Symbolizes Russian Revival

¶3. (C) xxxxx told us that the return of historically Russian property in the Holy Land was a symbol of Russia's post-Soviet cultural and religious renaissance. The properties, which had either been abandoned by the USSR or sold to Israel, would be used for facilities for religious pilgrims and tourists, as well as Russian language schools and clinics that would benefit local residents, including the large number of Russian-speaking Israelis. The MFA was also considering establishing a consulate at the compound in Jerusalem. xxxxx said that at present Russia had only its Embassy in Tel Aviv and a small Mission in Ramallah to handle relations with the PA. A presence in Jerusalem would help provide assistance to the many Russian citizens living in Israel as well as Russian tourists, whose numbers, presently estimated at 200,000 per year, were expected to grow significantly after the Russian-Israeli agreement to end visa requirements became operative in September.

¶4. (C) xxxxx explained that countries in the region recognized that providing land to Russia was a means to improve bilateral relations and attract Russian tourists. In addition to Israel and the PA, Jordan had already given Russia land on the banks of the Jordan River historically associated with Jesus' baptism (ref A). Lebanon also had property that once belonged to Russia, although discussion of its return had not begun.

¶5. (C) xxxxx that GOR interest in the Holy Land property was part of the Russian desire to "return" to the Middle East in various ways: politically by resurrecting ties with Arab states that had been allowed to atrophy during the 1990s, diplomatically by enhancing its role in the Middle East Peace Process, and culturally by re-establishing a physical presence for the Russian State and Church. For Russians, it was only fitting that the Orthodox Church should have a presence in Jerusalem along with the other ancient Christian dominations already present: the Roman Catholics and Greek Orthodox. xxxxx

said that the PA hoped that giving Russia land for cultural and religious facilities would attract Russian tourists to the West Bank.

Moscow 00001991 002 of 003

Working for the "Glory of Russia"

16. (U) xxxxx explained that while the GOR would formally own the properties in Israel and the West Bank, the non-governmental Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society (IOPS) would run the cultural and religious facilities. Although the GOR referred to the IOPS, founded in 1872, as "one of the oldest" Russian NGOs, the organization is not independent of the government. The head of Russia's Audit Chamber, Sergey Stepashin, is Chairman of the IOPS and MFA Middle East Department Deputy Director Oleg Ozerov heads its international section. The MFA and IOPS signed a memorandum of cooperation in June to facilitate GOR assistance to the organization's efforts to develop Russia's "humanitarian, scientific and cultural relations" with states in the Middle East. During a June address, FM Lavrov highlighted IOPS' role in "peoples' diplomacy" that supplemented official political contacts. He praised IOPS for helping Russia's spiritual revival and demonstrating that the country was an "influential and respected power." Lavrov closed, "In order to worthily return to the Holy Land, we must work...to the glory of Russia!"

17. (U) IOPS will depend financially upon Russian oligarchs, including Roman Abramovich and Israeli resident Arkadiy Gaidamak, both of whom reportedly agreed to the GOR request that they pay expenses related to acquiring the compound in Jerusalem.

Russian Emigres: A "Bridge" Between Russia and Israel

18. (C) xxxxx said that the immigration of Russian Jews to Israel created a bond between the two countries that had a profound impact on Russia-Israel relations. This did not mean that those who fled Soviet anti-Semitism had pressured their new homeland for closer ties with the country that had repressed them. Instead they created in Israel a center of Russian culture and formed a "bridge" between the countries. xxxxx said that many Russian-speakers in Israel maintained strong ties to their homeland and some had even returned. The Israeli Embassy estimated that "tens of thousands" of Israel's Russian-speakers currently live and work in Moscow. xxxxx said that he personally knew many Russian-speaking Israelis who came to participate in Russia's economic boom. With their knowledge of Russian language and culture, plus university degrees and business experience gained in Israel, Europe or the U.S., they could easily find opportunities here.

Emigres Create "Warm Feelings" for Israel

19. (C) xxxxx, differentiated the Jews who fled Soviet oppression and anti-Semitism in the 1970s and 1980s from those who left in the 1990s to avoid the chaos and uncertainty of post-Soviet Russia. The latter group did not leave as "ideological enemies" and maintained positive feelings for their homeland. Thanks to cable television and the Internet, they have been able to maintain contact with Russia. While this has been the experience of Russian immigrants who landed in different countries, xxxxx said it was especially acute in Israel where Russian-speakers were one-seventh of the population. This played well within Russia, where a Russian cultural foothold in the Middle East generated "warm feelings toward Israel." During Israel's 2006 war with Lebanon, Russian television showed Russian-speaking Israeli soldiers, which helped heighten Russian sympathy for Israel's situation. xxxxx cited public opinion polls that

showed Russians were more inclined to have a favorable opinion of Israel than the U.S.

¶10. (C) xxxxx said that immigrants to Israel and elsewhere extended Russia's cultural reach, which the GOR recognized as a means to project at least the perception of influence. For example, the World Congress of Russian Jewry, an organization that represents Russian Jews in 35 countries and receives government support, met in May in Jerusalem where Russian Federation Council member Boris Shpigle said that Russian Jews must cultivate a special relationship with their homeland. xxxxx stressed that with the exception of Ukraine and the Baltic, where Russia had serious political concerns, the GOR saw its compatriots abroad not as a "fifth column" but as a bridge between their homeland and adopted countries. In Israel, a country of which some of Russia's biggest oligarchs were citizens, the GOR hoped this would provide opportunities for investment and give Russia access to Israeli technology. Israeli investment might also come to

Moscow 00001991 003 of 003

Russia, as it did in the case of Lev Levayev, whose development company is reportedly undertaking large-scale projects in Moscow and will expand its existing jewelry factory in Perm. xxxxx thought Russia-Israel trade, which is estimated at \$2.3 billion in 2006, could be several times higher.

Immigration to Israel is "Dead"

¶11. (C) While Russia continues to benefit from the presence of its existing emigres in Israel, Russian immigration to Israel is "all but dead" according to Leonard Terlitskiy, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society's representative in the CIS. Terlitskiy, who was among the first Jews to leave the USSR during the Brezhnev era, told us that "anyone who wanted to leave has already left." The Russian economy offered enough opportunities and anti-Semitism is not the problem it once was, allowing Jews to remain where they face less chance of becoming a victim of terrorism than they would in Israel. Russian daily Vremya Novostey reported that in 2007, only 6,700 people immigrated from the CIS to Israel, compared to 34,000 in 2001. Meanwhile, 38,000 Israeli nationals were known to have returned recently to live in Russia and the CIS.

¶12. (C) xxxxx thought that the prospect of visa-free travel to Israel would allow Russian Jews to visit Israel and develop an affinity for the country and their compatriots there without the need to emigrate. Members of Moscow's Jewish community recently told Vremya Novostey that they saw no need to emigrate and could always visit Israel on a holiday.

Russia Maintains "Pragmatic" Policies

¶13. (C) Observers noted that despite the increasing cultural proximity of Russia and Israel, the GOR maintained its "pragmatic" stance on weapons sales to Syria and contacts with Hamas, despite Israeli opposition. This stemmed from Moscow's ability to compartmentalize aspects of a foreign policy that fostered relations with Israel and Syria simultaneously. xxxxx joked that perhaps Israel had evened the score through military sales to Georgia, including unmanned aerial drones, the shooting down of which recently contributed to increasing tensions between Moscow and Tbilisi (ref B). xxxxx and Israeli Emboffs told us separately that military sales to Georgia were not an irritant in Russia-Israel relations, although the GOR had asked Israel not to sell offensive weapons systems to Tbilisi. Beyrle